'A Pleasing Rape': John Dennis, Music and the Queer Sublime

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'If the sublime is gendered as masculine', Catherine Maxwell observed in 2001, 'then criticism has managed to turn a convenient blind eye to its homoerotic penetration of the male subject'.[1] A decade earlier, Camille Paglia had made a similar intervention: '[Edmund] Burke's locutions clearly demonstrate the passive self-subordination of male devotees of the sublime. In [Percy Bysshe] Shelley's "Mont Blanc" [1816], nature overwhelms male imagination with chilling fascistic force. ... [Friedrich] Schiller too, following Burke, sees a "paroxysm" or "shudder" in the sublime, a joy turning to "rapture"'.[2] These brief, penetrating critiques expose a paradox at the heart of the sublime: they identify a moment of passivity, in which a man (so often the implied subject and source of the sublime) is variously penetrated, ravished, overwhelmed, gripped, shaken – and carried off by a seemingly superhuman, but also masculine force. Both Maxwell and Paglia imply that male investments in the sublime warrant not only feminist criticism but also insights from the history of male sexuality.

Of course, theories of the sublime are not innocent of the problem and pleasure of male passivity. Following Immanuel Kant, ravishment is conventionally figured as part of a process that ends triumphantly in a heightened awareness of the reflective mental powers that allow the subject to rise above a situation of danger or bafflement. Schiller, citing and elaborating upon Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), marvelled that the sense of 'impotence' engendered by 'the irresistible power of nature', is an occasion for overcoming, for a sense of 'superiority' whereby '*humanity* in our person remains unvanquished'.[3] This theory, based around a notion of transcendence of the body, is philosophically ingenious but not widely applicable to the eighteenth century. As James Kirwan among many others observes, aesthetics in the eighteenth century was concerned

[1] Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 8.

[2] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 269, citing Friedrich Schiller, 'On the Sublime', in Nathan Haskell Dole, ed., *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, vol. 1 (Boston: Nicholls, 1902), 127.

[3] Friedrich Schiller, 'On the Sublime' (1793) in *Essays,* ed. and trans. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 22–44, at 26–7.

with pleasure and the senses, and the sublime was more akin to inebriation or ecstasy than transcendence of the body.[4]

To explore this issue of the sublime and male penetration further, I turn to 'an unmarried man of intense sensibility', one associated with John Dryden and much involved with *opera seria* in London: no, not the composer George Frideric Handel, but John Dennis, a critic, poet and dramatist, active around 1700.[5] My choice of Dennis as a case study is indebted to (at least) two earlier studies of this critic. One is a highly suggestive account of literary culture in eighteenth-century London by Dominic Janes, in which Dennis' preoccupation with the sublime is brought into the orbit of an emerging male homosexual subculture. A deeper debt is to a doctoral dissertation by Miranda Stanyon, concerning the imbrication of sound in the literary order of the sublime, in which Dennis features as a founding figure. At one level, my chapter elaborates Stanyon's suggestion that the sublime is haunted by sodomy.[6] Admittedly, in stubbornly according sodomy a foundational (rather than phantasmatic) significance, I end up offering a very different kind of interpretation. Nonetheless, my chapter can be usefully read alongside her account.

Dennis linked the sublime to (sexual) violence with notorious explicitness.[7] In a much cited phrase, he likened the (specifically Longinian) sublime to 'a pleasing rape'. While the metaphor might seem all too self-evident, and to warrant only censure, I want to flesh out its import historically and contextually. In what intellectual milieu was it possible for Dennis to burnish the literary sublime through this turn of phrase? Who were his readers, and upon whom is this pleasing rape metaphorically enacted? There are many

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[4] James Kirwan, 'A Pleasing Rape? Boswell versus Johnson in the History of the Sublime', chap. 2 of *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Rational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 15–36, at 17.

[5] Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43. Janes notes that Dennis qualifies the experience of 'pleasing rape' by emphasising that terror mingles with joy when the subject knows themselves to be safe: '"no passion is attended with greater joy than enthusiastic terror, which proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us"'.

[6] Miranda Stanyon, 'Musical Sublimes in English and German Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century' (PhD dissertation, Queen Mary University of London, 2014), 57–60, 86–90, 255–6.

[7] Dennis's life is told in [Harry Gilbert] Paul, *John Dennis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), which is partly summarised and updated in Edward Niles Hooker, *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), in explanatory notes (to both volumes) and the substantial 'introduction' (to volume 2, vii–cxliii) – hereafter CW. On the reception of Handel as similar in artistic character to Dryden, see Charles Avison, 'Reply to the Author of Remarks on the Essay on Musical Expression', appendix to *An Essay on Musical Expression*, 2nd ed. (London: C. Davis, 1753), 1–53, at 50–1, cited in Claudia L. Johnson, '"Giant Handel" and the Musical Sublime', *American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 19/4 (1986), 515–33, at 519–20.

reasons to take a closer look. For one, Dennis was no literary libertine. His life-long project was to defend the English stage, and its tradition of dramatic poetry, against the lingering Puritan charge that they fostered public immorality and vice. Himself a moralist, Dennis stoked moral panic about Italian opera and about the sin of sodomy – vicious pleasures he united under the headings of the unnatural and the foreign. In these contexts, his own relationship to a discourse of rape warrants further research.

In this chapter, I locate Dennis's locution in his homosocial context in which the legacy of classical homoeroticism mingled with ideas of male sexual and creative virility. This sets up my suggestion of a peculiar rapport between Dennis's public condemnation of sodomy between men and the 'pleasing rape' of his sublime. I don't seek to equate sodomy and the sublime, but rather to establish them as mirror images. Within Dennis's thinking, I argue, the positive charge attaching to the 'pleasing rape' was bound up with the maintenance of male literary hegemony and the patrimonial transmission of genius to fledgling authors.

In the final phase of my chapter, I bring these arguments to bear on music's place in the order of the sublime. Given Dennis's reputation as 'a music-hating moralist' the prospects for music in his theorising look unpromising.[8] However, Dennis was not against music so much as ambivalent about its power.[9] This power, which he imagined in sensuous, erotic and feminine terms, neighboured the sublime but tended more to weaken than shore up male identity. Dennis acknowledged the capacity of music to invade and transport the male subject; he attributed some of the penetrative force of dramatic poetry to its 'musical' characteristics, but he was troubled when music acted with any degree of autonomy. If Dennis's sublime is haunted by the discourse of male-male sodomy, so it is troubled by proximity to music. I briefly illustrate these critical patterns through Dennis's 'dramatick opera' *Rinaldo and Armida* (1698), with a score by John Eccles. Dennis elided music with the

[8] This phrase forms part of the subheading in an excellent discussion of Dennis's views of music and the theatre in Maria Semi, *Music as a Science of Mankind in Eighteenth-Century Britain,* trans. Timothy Keates (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 37.

[9] Semi (ibid.) is also alive to this ambivalence, though our readings differ in emphasis.

diabolic magic and erotic power of the Saracen sorceress Armida.[10] Threatening to soften and un-man the crusading hero, music – like Armida herself – is doubly marked as a divinely wrought and degenerate, as sublimely elevated and fallen. In the years immediately prior to Handel's arrival in London, the prospects for a musical sublime were extremely mixed.

Sodomy and/as the sublime

In *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) Dennis highlights the issue of sublime penetration with unusual explicitness. This landmark essay, the first work of English criticism published by subscription, was initially advertised in the *Daily Courant* (27 May 1704) as a substantial treatise on the nature of poetry, its genres and history, to include proposals for the improvement of tragedy, supplemented with new translations from Sophocles. This was a grand undertaking because under the heading 'poetry' Dennis included 'dramatic poetry', that is, tragedy and comedy for the stage. Presumably, Dennis intended to establish a legitimising framework for dramatic poetry in the wake of much of the publicised attacks on the theatre by Jeremy Collier (*A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, 1698) and by Richard Blackmore (in the preface to *Prince Arthur,* 1695).[11] Dennis had already published replies to both critics and a vindication of the stage.[12] But as Dennis's modern editor, Niles Hooker, observes in his magisterial two-volume edition of Dennis's critical writing (henceforth *CW*), the project foundered when 'only seventy-seven gentlemen in England were willing to pay a guinea for a folio volume of critical remarks' (CW 1:507). Incidentally, there were a few more subscribers than Hooker calculated: in addition to the seventy-seven whose names appear in the subscription list, Dennis referred to four or five whose names were unknown. Nor were the subscribers uniformly 'gentlemen': Mrs Manley, Mrs Dore, Lady Broadgrave and Mrs Fencill also signed

[10] 'Dramatick opera' was a period designation for what today is often styled 'semi-opera'. See Michael Burden, 'Aspects of Purcell's Operas,' in Michael Burden, ed., *Henry Purcell's Operas: The Complete Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–27.

[11] Collier published five pamphlets against the theatre between 1698 and 1708, beginning with *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English State* (London: Keble, 1698). On the ensuing controversy see Sister Rose Anthony, *The Jeremy Collier Stage Controversy, 1698–1726* (1936; Rpt. New York: Blom, 1966) and Robert D. Hume, 'Jeremy Collier and the Future of the London Theatre in 1698', *Studies in Philology*, 96/4 (1999), 480–511.

[12] 'Remarks on a Book Entitled, Prince Arthur, An Heroic Poem' (1696), CW 1:46–144; 'The Usefulness of the Stage, to the Happiness of Mankind, to Government, and to Religion' (1698) CW 1:146–93, and 'The Person of Quality's Answer to Mr. Collier's Letter, Being A Disswasive From The Play-House' (1704), CW 1:299–319.

up.[13] Nonetheless, Hooker is correct in emphasising that literary criticism could not readily command that kind of fee, and that many of the critic's circle – including the writers William Congreve, William Wycherley and Richard Steele – are absent from the list.

During much of this treatise, Dennis sacralised sublime poetry, tracing its origins to the 'divine Poesy' of the bible and psalms. His project here, as throughout his career, was to defend stage drama in English and to argue that the theatre served the national, public good. Dennis recommended religious subject matter to poets and dramatists as a source of spiritual height and moral didacticism. Abruptly, however, he abandoned this emphasis by turning to Pseudo-Longinus, through whom he summoned a worldly, manly, militarised sublime:

> [Longinus] tells us ... that the sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain admiration, mingled with astonishment and with surprise, which is quite another thing than the barely pleasing, or the barely persuading; that it gives a noble vigour to a discourse, and invincible force, which commits a pleasing rape upon the very soul of the reader; that whenever it breaks out where it ought to do, like the artillery of Jove, it thunders, blazes, and strikes at once, and shows all the united force of a writer. (CW 1:359)

The term 'rape'

In the course of research, I have been encouraged by readers and respondents to ameliorate the problematic locution of 'a pleasing rape', to wrest it from the domain of sex through semantic and philological argument. I have tried to go along with this, but the results have tended only to reinforce the centrality of sexual fantasy to the founding moment of the Anglophone sublime. The term 'rape', of course, indicated not only sexual violence but also abduction and 'carrying off'.[14] This sense of the word is undoubtedly pertinent, helping to characterise the effect of the sublime as a forceful 'transport' of the

[13] I consulted the subscription list (which is not reproduced in *CW*) via the University of Oxford Text Archive at http://ota.ox.ac.uk/desc/4531.

[14] See 'Rape' in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*: '1. The act of taking something by force; esp. the seizure of property by violent means; robbery, plundering' and '2a. Originally and chiefly: the act or crime, committed by a man, of forcing a woman to have sexual intercourse with him against her will, esp. by means of threats or violence.' Both meanings were current around 1700.

soul. But judging by classical myth, the dictionary distinction between abduction and sexual violence is difficult to sustain on the ground (and in the air). In the literary culture in which Dennis operated, one kind of rape almost always involved the other and both occasioned celebration: Ganymede was exulted by the eagle's talons, and heroes were born to mortal women 'favoured' by gods.

If semantic argument could not smooth over Dennis's 'pleasing rape', philology also failed to palliate. Dennis probably derived his oxymoron from Dryden's poem *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), where it appears in connection with the plot of Absalom, an illegitimate son, against his father, King David, based on the second book of Samuel.[15] The words are those of Achitophel, a treacherous advisor to the court. He persuades Absalom that rebellion would be secretly welcome by King David – that a 'rape upon the crown' would actually be, for King David, a 'pleasing rape upon the crown'.[16] If this is Dennis's source and intertext, it tends more to darken than dispel the clouds. Thinking of rape as an attack on sovereignty – one that allegorised the contemporary plot of Duke Monmouth to oust Charles II – hardly lowers the stakes of Dennis's language. Instead, the multivalence of the term rape, and the analogical reasoning of the period, allowed Dryden to escalate rape from an individual misfortune to a constitutional catastrophe.[17]

Creative virility in literary theory

Dennis was not uniquely perverse in celebrating English literary culture through notions of unbounded male power and sexual force. Such thinking was endemic: in prefaces and essays, Dryden returned to this idea that his virility or (in humoral theory) his heat passed into his work and impacted the reader physically. Dennis's innovation was to package this thinking under the headings of genius and the sublime. Anne Cotterill, discussing Dryden's

[15] Cited from Steven N. Zwicker and David Bywaters, eds., *John Dryden: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), 111. The borrowing seems not to be subject to a published discussion but Miranda Stanyon generously shared draft material with me in which she explores the intertextuality in depth. On the locution itself, within Dryden's thought, see Duane Coltharp, '"Pleasing Rape": The Politics of Libertinism in The Conquest of Granada', *Restoration: Studies in Literary Culture 1660–1700*, 21/1 (1997), 15–31.

[16] The link in Restoration theatre between the figures of the rapist and the tyrant is explored in Julia Rudolph, 'Rape and Resistance: Women and Consent in Seventeenth-Century English Legal and Political Thought', *Journal of British Studies*, 39/2 (Apr., 2000), 157–84.

[17] Dryden often linked rape and political tyranny. See James Anderson Winn, *'When Beauty Fires the Blood': Love and the Arts in the Age of Dryden* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) chap. 5.

Fables Ancient and Modern (1700), notes the poet's identification with 'the "violent" and "impetuous" Homer', with 'youthful, pointedly "masculine" qualities', and the importance of predation and hunt to his description of the process of literary creation.[18] Examples are also found closer to hand. In the preface to *Absalom and Achitophel,* Dryden – addressing the losing party in the allegory – affirmed: 'If a poem have a genius, it will force its own reception in the world. For there's a sweetness in good verse which tickles even while it hurts, and no man can be heartily angry with him who pleases him against his will.'[19] In speaking of the force of genius, of sweet hurt, and pleasures experienced unwillingly, Dryden enters the discursive domain of 'the pleasing rape' proposed within the poem itself. A related celebration of 'godlike' virility and 'divine lust' begins the poem, as Dryden praises King David's 'promiscuous use of concubine and bride' and notes approvingly how 'his vigorous warmth [he] did variously impart/ To wives and slaves, and, wide as his command,/ Scattered his Maker's image through the land.'[20] The term 'slaves', which fails to rule out male objects of King David's vigour, also hints at rape.

In sum, the literary and literary-theoretical contexts for Dennis's 'pleasing rape' amplify rather than diminish its sexual connotations. In one regard, however, qualification is needed: Dryden and Dennis operated within a homosocial literary culture; they addressed themselves to a male reader and, following the then-prevailing one-sex model, they deemed the human subject normatively male.[21] (When the rape of a woman by a man was at issue, Dennis highlighted the specificity of the situation and marshalled appropriate condemnation.)[22] What I'm getting at is that the metaphorical rape of the sublime was

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[18] Anne Cotterill, 'Dryden's Fables and the Judgment of Art', in Steven N. Zwicker, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 259–79, at 260, 262 and 263.

[19] Zwicker and Bywaters, eds., *Dryden: Selected Poems*, 111.

[20] Ibid., 114.

[21] By homosocial I mean relationships between men characterised by their exclusivity and, variously, by passionate friendship, indifference and/or competition. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, I understand homosociality to take historically specific forms, and neither to preclude nor require erotic feelings and sexual acts. It is this ambiguity, or flexibility, that renders it useful to queer theory, especially for periods 'before' sexuality. See *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–5. On the one-sex model see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[22] In a letter to Richard Steele of 3 April, 1719 (CW 2:165–7), concerning the potential of stage works for timely moral instruction, Dennis rejected theatrical representation of the rape of a woman. Angered that Steele did not produce his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at Drury Lane in the Winter of 1718, Dennis inveighed against the staging of less morally instructive dramas: Dryden's *All for Love* and Edward Young's *Busiris.* The

probably imagined as taking place between men.[23] The violence that Dennis's literary theory does to women is not that of rape but exclusion.

A classical legacy of literary homoeroticism

In two nuanced, richly researched books, Paul Hammond elaborates the legacies of Plato's Symposium and of Ovid's Metamorphoses for English gentlemen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men educated on the classics in all-male environments and 'who freely shared beds, embraced and kissed, and used highly-charged language for their bonds of friendship and social obligation'.[24] Ovid was a source of the fable of mortal Ganymede, raped by Jove; he also recounted 'the stories of Adonis, Narcissus and Hermaphroditus, all beautiful youths who resisted advances by women'.[25] Ovid's telling of the myth of Orpheus, twice disappointed of his bride, sees the poet-musician renounce the love of women and sing 'of the love of Jove for Ganymede, Apollo for Hyacinthus, and Sylvanus for Cyparissus'. Just as influential was Plato's *Symposium* that lent philosophical gravity to the homoerotic. Through the *Symposium,* Dennis and his student colleagues were informed that the pursuit of knowledge, the movement of the spirit towards understanding of 'ideal forms' (essential truths beyond the material world) began with same-sex desire, specifically with attraction to the transcendent (because androgynous) beauty glimpsed in the youthful male body. Needless to say, this valorisation of desire between men operates within a system that today sets off alarm bells as misogynistic and problematically sexualising of 'youthful' males. But Hammond's point is not to imagine the past as a gay-male utopia but rather to highlight

latter, he declared, has 'a Rape in it'. He criticised national taste as perverse – 'A Rape is the peculiar Barbarity of our English Stage' – before blaming the female spectators for marshalling insufficient outrage: 'Women … will sit as quietly and passively at the Relation of a Rape in a Tragedy, as if they thought that Ravishing gave them a Pleasure, for which they have a just Apology'. The comment, though perversely blaming female spectators, shows an awareness that rape is sometimes misconstrued as welcome – precisely the conceit he marshalled in *The Grounds of Criticism.* However, his comments are characteristically misogynist. Not only did Dennis censure women for tolerating such scenes, he speculated they preferred to see themselves in the exalted role of victim than endure the criticisms of their sex levelled in comedy. *CW* 2:165–7, at 166.

[23] In saying this, I do not rule out the existence of some female readers, nor minimise the reactions of women of the past or today – Dennis belongs to many histories and readers. The point is simply that to assume a heterosexual framework for Dennis's fantasy – and for English literary culture of this time – would be anachronistic and problematically hetero-normative.

[24] Paul Hammond, *Love Between Men in English Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 27 (see also chaps. 2 and 4); and *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

[25] Hammond, *Love Between Men*, 26.

that, prior to the modern discourse of 'sexuality' and the emergence of the categories of the homosexual and heterosexual, literary Englishmen did not always police boundaries between different kinds of male intimacy. In works of fiction, particularly, they sometimes opened spaces for same-sex desire and fantasy.

The sublime opened such a space. Dennis's account of the sublime evinces an imagination that is not just homosocial but can seem homoerotic.[26] At the core of the sublime he placed the creative virility of the great male authors of English literature whom he sought to defend from charges of the immorality of the theatre by Blackmore and Collier. In a lengthy response to the preface to Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1696), Dennis traced greatness (a quality he found lacking in this ten volume 'epic poem') to genius, those 'secret motions' (CW 1:47) of the mind that conferred 'felicity in writing' and through which 'the soul [of the author and reader/auditor] is transported' (CW 1:46). Comprising an ability to bring forth exceptional ideas and images, genius also grants the capacity to express them with 'a degree of Fire sufficient to give [the] animal spirits a sudden and swift agitation' (CW 1:47 and editor 1:450). Invoking the humours, Dennis found the genius hot (or at least not 'cold'), and in possession of 'excellent organs' (CW 1:47). This is a notably worldly, medical and rather intimate explanation of how a genius is made, and how his writing gets inside the audience.

Dennis announced his related theory of the sublime in *The Advancement of Poetry* (1701), with reference to Pseudo-Longinus, a treatise at least thrice translated into English (by John Hall in 1652, J. Pulteney in 1680, and anonymously in 1698), but also known through the French edition by Nicolas Boileau (1674).[27] Significantly, for understanding Dennis's self-positioning, his treatise is dedicated to Dryden's patron John, Lord Marquess of Normanby, Earl of Mulgrave. Dennis captured the sublime phenomenologically as the experience of 'an invincible force, transporting the soul from its ordinary situation, and a

[26] I am not the first to puzzle over the relationship between sodomy and the sublime. See Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). For Halpern, working with a post-structuralist methodology of textual analysis, both categories concern that which lies beyond representation. In commentary on Edmund Burke, he notes that disavowal of sodomy serves to found aesthetic appreciation.

[27] Timothy M. Costelloe, 'The Sublime: A Short Introduction to a Long History', in Costelloe, ed., *The Sublime from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–7, at 5.

transport, and a fullness of joy mingled with astonishment' (CW 1:223).[28] By 'astonishment' Dennis meant a kind of 'awe', but the experience could also turn on 'terror' (CW 1:215) – a passion attending fear of divine retribution and the realm of hell (a point to which I return at the end of this chapter). Irritated by the lack of a concise definition in Longinus, Dennis defined the sublime as the sum total of that experience and the means of producing it (CW 1:223). Those means, he argued, turned on enthusiastic passions, meaning strong internal agitations of body and mind, a physiological emphasis absent in Pseudo-Longinus (CW 1:216).

Passions are not necessarily sexual, but neither are they easily sequestered from the erotic, and Dennis's emphasis on strong arousal and enthusiasm was bound up with his celebration of the sensuality of poetry: 'poetry is poetry, because it is more passionate and sensual than prose' (CW 1:215).[29] Both terms – 'passionate' and 'sensual' – help Dennis to account for the ecstasy of the sublime.

Dennis *contra* sodomy

However, Dennis's relationship with the homosocial and homoerotic elements of his literary context was conflicted and contradictory. In the publications through which he is remembered today, he inveighed against sodomy and 'unnatural Vices' between men. (Foucault's assertion that the early-modern category of sodomy was incoherent need not set it beyond analysis; however freely floating, the term 'sodomy' is important here because it was one of few terms available to speak of sex between men, even if it did not only signify those practices.[30]) Dennis upheld the duty of the playhouse to demonstrate the happiness attending love that is 'lawful and regular' (CW 1:153) in *The Usefulness of the Stage, to the*

[28] Samuel Monk attributes the shift from the sublime, as elevated rhetoric, to a matter of intense 'emotions' (as he has them) to Boileau. See Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935), 29 and 31–2, cited Costello, 'A Short Introduction', in *The Sublime from Antiquity to the Present*, 5.

[29] In the 'epistle dedicatory' to *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) (CW 1: 197–207), Dennis spelled out the connection between enthusiastic passion and love: 'Passion is the principal Thing in Poetry, and tho' Obscenity [of Ancient literature] has something too gross and fulsome in it, to consist with the Delicacy of a Tender Passion, yet, by mingling with their Obscene Verses, their Cupid, their Venus, and the rest of their Amorous Divinities, they [that is, the Ancients] had the Advantage of that other sort of Passion, which we call Enthusiasm' (CW 1:199).

[30] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 134, and Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men,* 8.

Happiness of Mankind, to Government, and to Religion. Occasioned by a Late Book, Written by Jeremy Collier (1698). This was a response to Collier's accusation that love on the stage inflamed passions that had to be discharged after the show, often criminally. The right kind of love, Dennis replied, inspires people to 'become worthy' of their 'beloved Object' and turns them away from libertine pleasures and sodomitical vice: 'If the Love that is shewn [in Tragedy], is lawful and regular … [it] not only frequently reclaims them from some grosser Pleasures of which they were fond before, but breeds in them an utter Detestation of some unnatural Vices, which have been so much in use in England, for these last Thirty Years' (CW 1:153). Here Dennis suggests that the playhouse might serve as a cure for sodomy by redirecting male sexual passion to worthy objects of desire. Seemingly encouraged by the ingenuity of his theory, he returned to it a few pages later, confirming that by celebrating 'regular love' the stage might place 'a Check upon the other Vices, and peculiarly upon that unnatural Sin, in the Restraining of which, the Happiness of Mankind is, in so evident a Manner, concerned' (CW 1:156).

Moral and sexual influence of the stage

The disagreement between Dennis and Collier is based on a shared premise that can seem strange today. Both men accord the theatre great significance in shaping sexual conduct – as if an evening's entertainment might determine the direction of (what was later styled) the libido. This is just another way of saying that they write before 'sexuality' – the discourse of persistent, psychologically grounded patterns of desire. As part of their more fluid, but also more religious thinking, Collier and Dennis imagine sex between men without recourse to an axiomatic divide between gay and straight, but rather through the axis of virtue and vice. This was hardly less burdensome, however, not only because personal vice could lead to damnation, but because it was freighted, discursively, with national import. Irregularity or excess of pleasure threatened the prevailing civic humanist ideal of the self-possessed, self-disciplined warrior subject, ever prepared to defend the sovereignty and liberty of the nation.

Dennis himself marshalled the alarming prospect of theatre's 'pernicious Consequence' for sexual behaviour, and for England, in his Collier-like attacks on the rise of Italian *opera seria* in London. Famously, he inveighed against this genre in *An Essay on the Opera's* [sic] *after the Italian Manner* (1706) and more pointedly in the less well-known

pamphlet *An Essay upon Publick Spirit* (1711). In the former, Dennis, decrying the perceived irrationality of a music-driven form (one more 'Sound' than 'Sense'), deployed venerable tropes of Italian music as effeminising, softening and seductive.[31] Consistent with his way of thinking about the influence of art on character, he pictured sybaritic Englishmen unmanned by their experience of opera's excessive 'sensual Delight': 'And as soft and delicious Musick, by soothing the Senses, and making a Man too much in love with himself, makes him to little fond of the Publick; so by emasculating and dissolving the Mind, it shakes the very Foundation of Fortitude, and so is destructive of both Branches of the publick Spirit' (CW 1:389).

Five years later, the implied sodomitical potential of *opera seria* is made explicit and an altogether more modern meaning is granted to the notion of effeminacy. Italian opera, Dennis warned, will lead Englishmen not to the excessive love of women but to the vice of sodomy and sexual love between themselves – to the point of formalising their erotic attachment in marriage:

> The Ladies, with humblest Submission, seem to mistake their Interest a little in encouraging Opera's; for the more the men are enervated and emasculated by the Softness of the Italian Musick, the less will care for them, and the more for one another. There are some certain Pleasures which are mortal Enemies to their [women's] pleasures, that past the Alps about the same time with the Opera; and if our Subscriptions go on, at the frantic rate that they have done, I make no doubt but we shall come to see one Beau take another for Better for Worse, as once an imperial harmonious Blockhead [i.e. Nero] did Sporus. (CW 2:396)

The reference to Nero notwithstanding, Dennis may have known that mock weddings of this type were already taking place in the Molly houses – private, often domestic venues where men met to party and have sex with each other. The satirical, but also vivid and public idea, that men might enter into lasting quasi-marital relationships chimes with the current

[31] The literature on both topics is extensive. Useful starting points include: Linda Phyllis Austern, '"Forreine Conceites and Wandring Devises": The Exotic, the Erotic, and the Feminine' in Jonathan Bellman, ed., *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 26–42, on Italian music in England; Roger Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 31–66, on Italian opera in London; and E. J. Clery, *The Feminisation Debate in Eighteenth-Century England: Literature, Commerce and Luxury* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5–12 on civic humanism.

historiography of homosexual relations. Specifically, historians locate a watershed around 1700 when the emergence of an urban homosexual subculture offered increased possibilities for both self-definition and condemnation.[32] Dennis's writing bears witness to this change.

Dennis's early homoerotic writing

Dennis was not always so hard on sodomy. His earliest publications, different in tone from his anthologised extracts or later moralising, evoke a lively, homosocial context and are marked by moments of homoerotic innuendo and fantasy. *The Impartial Critick* of 1693 is written in the form of three dialogues between two young men of letters who drink together in a tavern. The artifice of dialogue evokes not classical didacticism but the innuendo of Restoration comedy. At the end of the second dialogue, Beaumont and Freeman discuss drunkenness – a 'vice against Nature' Freeman calls it, worse than whoring – before suggesting they pay up and go:

> F. Well, come, will you go? We'll pay at the Bar.
>
> B. Thou are Seven Years older, and shalt be my Govenour. But my lodgings are nearest, will you go lie with me?
>
> F. No, Faith, Sir, I hope for a better Bedfellow; but to Morrow at Eleven I expect you. Till then, Adieu.[33]

This humorous exchange, evoking Dennis's literary circles and club life, highlights the potential for one form of unnatural pleasure – drinking – to slip into another – men lying together.

Different literary and social conventions of male-male desire infuse Dennis's earliest surviving publication: his translation of the 'Passion of Byblis' (1692) from Ovid's Metamorphosis. This tale of a 'perverted passion' (Ovid's words) concerns Byblis's sexual

[32] See Richard Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700-1830* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1992); Raymond Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution,* vol. 1. *Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); and Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men,* 11.

[33] CW 1:23. The names of the interlocutors are those of the playwrights Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher whose works were published along with a treasury of Renaissance drama in two folio editions: *Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher Gentlemen* (London: Moseley and Robinson, 1647) and *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies* (London: Herringman, Martyn and Marriot, 1679).

love for her twin brother Caunus. Ovid's steamy, cautionary tale dwells on Byblis's inability to control her passion, but Dennis's translation is unusually free, even by the standards of the period, and introduces more pointedly Platonic, homoerotic themes.[34] Of course his changes admit multiple readings, but two aspects are relevant here. First, Dennis blurs the erotic focus, shifting some attention away from Byblis onto the brother Caunus, whose attributes are barely referenced in the original. Dennis's describes him as a 'beauteous Boy' and, in an entirely new passage, has Byblis describe making love to her brother, wrapping her 'wild arms' around his 'soft Limbs'.[35] Nor is Caunus the only sexualised male youth in the poem, as Dennis tells it. Cupid, too, is introduced as 'a wing'd delicious Boy' where Ovid simply has 'winged God of love'.[36] In speaking of love for beautiful 'boys', Dennis invoked the (obviously problematic) legacy of the *Symposium* within the seemingly unimpeachable context of classical translation. Of course, the practices of *paiderasteai,* which were not always sexual, were known to gentleman like Dennis, educated at Harrow and Cambridge on the writings of Plato, Socrates, Cicero and (perhaps) Catullus.

A second type of change that Dennis makes describes the satisfaction of Byblis's desire as an experience of being elevated and overwhelmed – the fulfilment of forbidden erotic love constituting a (reprehensible) form of sublimity. After consummating her passion in a dream, Byblis wakes to observe: 'Into what Heav'n of Rapture was I caught?/ Too powerful Joys for Words, too vast for Thought!' Ovid's original imparts intensity to the experience but not the vocabulary of the sublime: 'What bliss was mine! How real my ecstasy! Oh, how I lay dissolved in my delight'.[37] An implication is that women experience a sort of monstrous sublime when failing to control dangerous passions, their fleeting sense of height measuring the depths of their sin. But if Byblis is granted only problematic access to the sublime, the sublime in turn is troubled by its fleeting equivalence with intensely transgressive passion, with sodomy in the broader period sense of unnatural sexual acts.

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[34] My sense of the freedom of Dennis's translation rests on comparison with a near-contemporary translation by Stephen Harvey as 'The Passion of Byblis' in *Ovid's Metamorphosis translated by the most Eminent Hands* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1717). My references to Ovid's 'original' are to *Ovid: Metamorphoses,* trans. A. D. Melville, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1986), 213–20.

[35] Only the preface, not the translation, is included in CW 1:1–5. Quotations are from *The Select Works of Mr. John Dennis,* 2 vols. (London: John Darby, 1718), 1:60–80, at 60 and 62.

[36] Dennis, trans., 'The Passion of Byblis' in CW 1:63; Harvey, ed., *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, 214.

[37] Ibid., 214.

Unusually, in this instance, a youthful male is subject to an active female desire. Nor are the subject positions entirely settled: as they turn the pages, readers of both sexes experience Byblis's colourfully characterised desire, all the while knowing that the text arises from an intimate collaboration of male authors.

In tracing Dennis's vivid but contradictory engagement with male same-sex desire I do not meant to figure him as struggling against his inclinations, a self-loathing homosexual before the fact. Rather, I seek to ground my reading of his theory of the sublime in a body of criticism that was homosocial, enthral to male creative virility, and imagined literary effects in physical and sexual terms, but which, at the same time, conveys ambivalence about sexual intimacy between men. In this tense context, the irresolvable paradox of the 'pleasing rape' can be read as a way of speaking of desires and experiences that have no satisfactory language and which fall between the twin strategies identified by Hammond of lyrical elaboration and moral condemnation.[38] Through oxymoron, Dennis captured experiences of literature and elements of literary culture that otherwise evaded articulation within available frameworks. Forced, but welcomed, violent but pleasurable, criminal but elevating, the sublime as 'pleasing rape' constructs an experience of aporia. This sublime feels queer.

Music and the order of the sublime

In Dennis's critical and dramatic works, music (like Byblis' desire) moves promiscuously in and out of the sublime. In so doing, it highlights tensions within the sublime itself, both as a category of thought, and as an experience of penetration alternately elevating and undoing the male subject.

Dennis needed (a notion of) 'the musical' in his theory of the sublime to provide an explanation for how, empirically, poetry 'rapes' the soul. The musical, in a specific use of the term, constitutes poetry's sensual and suasive force. Rhythm, meter and rhyme, the sounds of spoken words, and the proportions (or 'harmony') of the poetic composition, he argued, lend words their energy and no small part of the passions they raise. Poetry, he

[38] Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men,* 11–12, with reference to Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'age classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 102–3.

asserted in chapter 5 of *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), is 'pathetick and numerous Speech':

> As poetry is an Art, it must be an Imitation of Nature. That the Instrument with which it makes its Imitation, is Speech, need not be disputed. That Speech must be Musical, no one can doubt: For Numbers distinguish the Parts of Poetick Diction, from the Periods of Prose. Now Numbers are nothing but articulate Sounds, and their Pauses measur'd by their proper Proportions of Time. And the Periods of Prosaick Diction are articulate Sounds, and their Pauses unmeasur'd by such Proportions. That the Speech, by which Poetry makes its Imitation, must be pathetick, is evident; for Passion is still more necessary to it than Harmony. For Harmony only distinguishes its Instrument from that of Prose, but Passion distinguishes its very Nature and Character. (CW 1:215)

In this scheme, music and sound are recognised as 'passionate' but not bearing conceptual content. The affinity of music and the passions rested on a shared ontology – both comprised 'movement' – and music directly influenced the motions of animal spirits, fluids and nerves in the human body.

Therein lay a problem for the place of music (broadly conceived) in the order of the sublime: music was careless about the conceptual company it kept, was readily appropriated for subjects now elevating and now ignoble, and so led listeners as easily to virtue as vice. Notably, Dennis did not deem music's power over the passions – nor the passions themselves – as intrinsically problematic, an innovation stressed by his editor Hooker. Everything rested on the objects to which the passions attached. Thus even in *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner* (1706) Dennis confessed, or boasted, that 'there is no Man living who is more convinc'd than my self of the Power of Harmony, or more penetrated by the Charms of Musick. … Musick may be made profitable as well as delightful, if it is subdordinate to some nobler Art' (CW 1:385).

Dennis's word choice, linking penetration and pleasure, recalls the pleasing rape of the sublime. But there is a difference, one that helps to explain Dennis's ambivalence: music does not overwhelm with manly force but invades through its 'charms'. In the case of operas 'entirely Musical' (CW 1:382) – that is sung throughout – music is 'meltingly moving' (384), 'soft and effeminate' (384), 'delicious' (389) and 'emasculating and dissolving [of] the

Mind' (389). It can seem that Dennis welcomed the forceful penetration of sublime poetry but was repelled by the seduction of Italian operatic singing, delivered for the most part by women and castrati. To describe Italian music as specifically 'feminine' is tempting, but Dennis's vocabulary is not so much concerned with 'gendering' music itself, but with music's effects on the male subject.

Putting theory into action, Dennis elided music with the erotic spell of powerful women in his stage tragedy *Rinaldo and Armida* (1698). However titillating, the drama served officially to warn of 'unlawful love' through the cautionary tale of the eponymous Christian knight held in erotic captivity by a Saracen sorceress.[39] The plot, from Tasso, was often adapted for the stage, but in comparison with the version of Quinault and Lully, two years before, and Handel's thirteen years later, Dennis is more explicit and systematic in linking the power of music to the supernatural, the erotic and the figure of woman.[40] Stage directions included in the printed drama specify that the enchantress Armida brings forth the majority of the music in this drama through, and as, magic.[41] Her intensions, are to possess and seduce Rinaldo. However, Dennis stood firm. *His* Rinaldo renounces not only Armida but the love of all women. So steadfast is his resolve to return to the bonds of male friendship, and the violent intimacy of battle, that it can even seem as though one 'unlawful love' will replace another.

[39] John Eccles, *Rinaldo and Armida,* ed. Steven Plank (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2011), 99:256. References to this work are to the edition by Steven Plank (hereafter RA). The page number is followed either by line number (as here) or bar number – in which case preceded by 'b'.

[40] For additional commentary on this work see Steven Plank, '"And Now about the Cauldron Sing": Music and the Supernatural on the Restoration Stage', *Early Music,* 18 (1990), 393–407; Kathyrn Lowerre, 'Dramatick Opera and Theatrical Reform: Dennis's Rinaldo and Armida and Motteux's The Island Princess', *Theatre Notebook*, 59 (2005), 23-40; Roger Savage, '"Even the Music between the Acts ...": John Dennis, Johann Adolph Scheibe and the Rethinking of Incidental Music, 1698/1738', in John Thomson, ed., *Books and Bibliography: Essays in Commemoration of Don McKenzie* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 141–59, and – exploring the relationship with Quinault's tragedy -- Michael Lee, '"You Sparks Who Have to Paris rid ...": Dennis and Eccles' *Rinaldo and Armida* (1698), and the Politics of Adaptation', summary of conference paper delivered at the Channel Connections Conference, University of Sheffield, 11–12 September 2014, at https://francbrit.wordpress.com/2014/09/29/you-sparks-who-have-to-paris-rid-dennis-eccles-rinaldo-and-armida-1698-and-the-politics-of-adaptation/ accessed 16/06/15.

[41] On the tradition of linking music and the supernatural in English stage works, see Linda Phyllis Austern, '"Art to Enchant": Musical Magic and Its Practitioners in English Renaissance Drama', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association,* 115 (1990), 191–206; Steven E. Plank, '"And Now about the Cauldron Sing"', 398–9, and Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Perhaps it did. A confirmed bachelor, Dennis reported a close rapport with his composer-collaborator, John Eccles. Whether these men were thrust together by professional circumstances, or chose to get into bed with each other, we do not know. Silence surrounds Eccles's personal biography; like Dennis, he seems to have lived the life of a bachelor. Whatever their private relationship, Eccles proved extremely sensitive to Dennis's vision for the place and import of music in the drama. In the preface to Eccles's published score, Dennis observed (with apparent straight face) that the composer 'has everywhere so thoroughly entered into my design, that if I had not known him very well, I should have often wondered at it' (RA 4).

Innuendo aside, it is tempting to imagine these two men thrilling at the hellish climax of their collaboration. Facing abandonment, Armida conjures 'horrid music' (RA 93 stage direction), a chaos of infernal spirits and the destructive forces of nature (RA 62–92). The composed music for string orchestra, solos and choruses, supplemented with stage thunder and clanking chains, invokes earthquakes, gales, a foaming sea, thunder, lightning and an ensemble of lyres tuned 'to the sound of [furies'] yells' (RA 84: bb. 218–19). Eccles responded to those yells with an ascending chromatic scale in the basso continuo, drawn out over five bars, harmonised in the upper strings with a succession of churning dissonant seventh chords. Perhaps the string performers, taking the hint, performed this with deliberate ill tuning and harshness of attack. Certainly, the chorus is called upon to 'howl', 'scream, roar and hiss' (RA 85–6: bb. 236–42) to paint 'the howls of the damned, in the height of their pains … and their screams and their roar, and their serpentine hiss'. In a memorable ejaculation, the expiring Armida utters the moral of her story: 'Tis the dread punishment of lawless love!' (RA 99: 208).

Conclusion

The Longinian sublime in England around 1700 is 'queer' because of its homosocial environment and discursive rapport with (various imaginings of) sex between men (sodomy or rape or both at once). The word 'queer' is also apt to characterise an intellectual landscape before sexuality, before the two-sex model, and before music emerges as a fine art possessed of a degree of autonomy. I have observed that Dennis was alive to issues of male same-sex desire, and his life – in so far as it can be known – was led in almost exclusively male company. In this regard he was more permanently 'homosocial' than

many in his circle, but based on the surviving evidence his personal and fleshly desires are unknown.

Dennis's attitude to music, his fear of its seductive, feminine allure, were typical of his time and place. He feared Italian song and instrumental music because they acted on the male subject like desire itself, like erotic love – experiences that threatened to undo, not strengthen male self-definition. In this sense, any 'lawless' love was threatening, whether across or between the sexes, while homosociality in literary culture – even when tinged with homoerotic motifs – was bound up not with transgression and punishment but with artistic value, moral virtue, social prestige and, in Sedwick's phrase, 'patrimonial continuity among males'.[42]

Change came quickly, however, and took (at least) two main forms. The first was the emergence of the two-sex model. The novel notion that men and women were antithetical but complementary forms of the human opened up new possibilities for the positive valuation and exercise of female agency.[43] It became possible to idealise 'femininity' – including the musically feminine – and to lend it a (constraining) value, at once moral and aesthetic. In this way, music could stand for values opposed to the sublime -- it could be soft, gentle and loveable – in Edmund Burke's word 'beautiful'.[44] The second change, coinciding with Burke's treatise, was spearheaded by Handel and his admirers. They took the radical step of installing a composer and his music in the order of the Longinian sublime. This involved an ingenious gender transition: music, particularly when coupled with high-minded words, became a manly force able to seize and penetrate. As William Hughes gushed in 1758 of Handel's Samson: 'There are certain happy moments for Genius's [sic], when the soul as if fill'd with fire divine, takes in all Nature, and spreads upon all Objects, that heavenly Life that animates them, those engaging Strokes that warm and ravish us.'[45]

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[42] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 36.

[43] Laqueur, *Making Sex.*

[44] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (2nd edn, 1759), ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). These possibilities are explored in my *Sovereign Feminine: Music and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2013), with reference to the feminocentric criticism of the English music historian Charles Burney.

[45] Cited from Johnson, '"Giant Handel" and the Musical Sublime', 520n.11